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AUTHOR Fairfax, Jean
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ABSTRACT

This publication contains a speech on the continuing struggle for equity in education for African Americans presented to the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) by Jean Fairfax when she received the John A. Griffin Award for Advancing Equity in Education. In the speech, Fairfax addressed disagreements within the black community over educational issues that have accelerated in scope, intensity, and anger since the 1960s. Covered are disagreements over integration implementation methods, the Atlanta (Georgia) school court case, the "Adams v. Richardson" suit of 1970; and the impact of the suit on traditionally black public colleges. In particular, the Adams experience is described as a possible model for confronting issues in the future as it was a conflict around which pragmatic, workable consensus developed. The future demographic diversity of the United States is described, and consequent educational issues are predicted, including multiculturalism, conflict among minority groups, and other issues. Jean Fairfax calls for agreement on strategies for developing a shared vision of the future in the United States and a continued commitment to the ideals of the SEF. (JB)

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A PERSPECTIVE ON THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE FOR EQUITY

Remarks by Jean Fairfax

Recipient of the 1991 John A. Griffin Award
for Advancing Equity in Education

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presented at
The Ninth Annual Continuing Conference
of the Southern Education Foundation

Atlanta, Georgia November 5, 1991

SEF
SINCE 1867

THE JOHN A. GRIFFIN AWARD FOR ADVANCING EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Throughout its 124-year history, improving educational opportunities for the South's most disadvantaged citizens has been the singular focus that has defined, and continues to define, the Southern Education Foundation.

SEF established the John A. Griffin Award for Advancing Equity in Education in 1990 to honor an individual who has made significant contributions to the advancement of equity and quality in education for minorities and disadvantaged citizens in this region. The award is named for John A. Griffin, SEF's executive director from 1965 to 1978.

Dr. Griffin is recognized as one of an exceptional group of scholars who earned prominence in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and '60s. Much of his career has focused on the resolution of Southern problems, with a particular emphasis on race relations. Prior to coming to the Southern Education Foundation, he was associate director for conciliation for the U.S. Community Relations Service, the federal agency created by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and charged with reducing racial tensions between various groups through mediation.

The philosophy which guided Dr. Griffin's work at the Southern Education Foundation grew out of his belief in others and his willingness to join them in taking measured risks to bring about meaningful change. Under his leadership, SEF played a central role in establishing public kindergartens in the South; created a higher education program to monitor and analyze the actions of states involved in the *Adams v. Richardson* desegregation litigation; and established an internship program in Southern education which over a period of years supported 75 young people in a variety of education settings.

The John A. Griffin Award for Advancing Equity in Education is made annually in conjunction with the Southern Education Foundation's Continuing Conference. The Continuing Conference, initiated in 1983, is an integral part of the Foundation's work in education and public policy. Each year, the Conference focuses on a different aspect of the general theme, "Education in a Changing South: New Policies, Patterns and Programs."

The 1990 award was presented to Augustus F. Hawkins, former U.S. representative from California.

JEAN FAIRFAX

An educator, civil rights activist, philanthropist and former SEF board member, Jean Fairfax has been an active force in the pursuit of educational justice in the South for nearly 50 years.

Before becoming involved with the Legal Defense and Educational Fund in 1965, she served as dean of women at Kentucky State College and Tuskegee Institute. She also completed service with the American Friends Service Committee and was director of their Southern Civil Rights Program.

From 1965 until she retired in 1985, she was director of the Division of Legal Information and Community Service for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Her work to document states' failure to abide by laws for school lunch programs resulted in a substantial increase in the number of poor children who received free and reduced-price lunches. Later, she served as a key strategist in the landmark case *Adams v. Richardson*, which led to mandates in dismantling dual systems of public higher education.

Miss Fairfax was first elected to SEF's Board of Trustees in 1972. During her seven years on the board, she served as vice president for three terms. She played a key role in the creation of SEF's higher education program, which was launched in 1974 to address the critical issues affecting blacks in the process of desegregating state systems of public higher education.

In 1989, Miss Fairfax received the Distinguished Grantmaker Award for career achievement in philanthropy from the Council on Foundations. She is the impetus behind the Council on Foundations' Pluralism in Philanthropy project, which was started in 1989 to encourage minorities to participate in the establishment of organized philanthropy.

Recently, she was named director of the Black Presence in Organized Philanthropy, a two-year research project of the Association of Black Foundation Executives. The project will commission a series of studies on the involvement of blacks in philanthropy as staff, board members and donors.

Miss Fairfax serves on the board of trustees for the Arizona Community Foundation and the Ruth Mott Fund. She lives in Phoenix, Arizona.

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE FOR EQUITY

I anticipated this evening with fear and trembling not knowing whether I was going to be toasted or roasted. I expected that when we came to this point in the program, someone in the back of the room would be yelling, "Did she learn anything? Did the years in the struggle for racial justice lead her to any conclusions?" The answer is, "Yes." I have concluded that it's okay to be confused.

There is a story about the seminary student who enrolled in Reinhold Niebuhr's classes because he was confused, hoping that sitting at the feet of a great teacher and theologian would clear the cobwebs from his mind and lead to intellectual enlightenment. Asked how he fared at the end of the year, the student replied, "I'm still confused but at a deeper level." To be confused, is to be perplexed, to be troubled.

Those of us here tonight are thrilled because we are engaged in one of the most important struggles of our century, however we define it—as equal educational opportunity, racial justice in education or educational equity.

We are excited about the victories when schools remain desegregated, when funding becomes more equitable, when racial disparities in admission, retention and graduation are erased, when women, or persons of color, become tenured professors or chancellors of major universities, when a traditionally black public college is awarded exclusive authority to offer a graduate or professional program and is provided the funds to do so.

But who among us has not been troubled, when the costs of these victories are borne by those who will never benefit from them? The generation of Prince Edward children, for example, who were sacrificed when their schools were closed for five years while state and local officials massively resisted efforts to

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integrate them. We are troubled when we undertake experiments, sometimes called "social engineering" by our critics, not knowing in advance who will benefit and who will be bypassed.

We move forward on faith, trusting in the Lord, and in sweeping decisions of earlier Supreme Courts, and then must be accountable for unintended, negative consequences. We are perplexed when universities achieve a critical mass of black students, who are then subjected to racially motivated acts of violence.

Yes, ours is a life of chaos, troubles and uncertainty—a life of great victories, some times limited successes and even failures. It's okay to be confused. But engagement in this critical struggle for educational equity must lead us to knowl-

edge. Our experiments must make us more effective social engineers.

Confusion at a deeper level is not despair. It is the wonderment that comes when we survive and learn, and are humbled by evidence that we are not omniscient and infallible. It is the confidence that comes when we are loved. It is the wisdom that comes from engagement and reflection.

Let me share with you tonight some thoughts about one of the most important learning experiences for me. The conviction that education is key to full participation in American political, social and economic institutions has been a

"Adams is an example of what can happen when blacks are determined to forge a programmatic consensus that combines apparently irreconcilable objectives."

unifying force in the African American community for generations. Most troubling to many of us, therefore, have been the disagreements over educational issues that have accelerated in scope, intensity and anger since the 1960s.

White folks, especially the media, are just discovering what we blacks have already known, have always known, that we are not a monolithic community. During the Thomas hearings, the media often devoted more time to trying to fathom our differences than to addressing his qualifications as a constitutional scholar. It is not the fact that we differed that is troubling. Many times in the past, robust arguments and the creative tensions that were produced by these arguments have ushered in a new era in the black experience in America. Rhetoric is important, but some times it becomes a luxury. It is no substitute for the critical need to develop consensus on strategies and programs that must be instituted to implement the larger goal that has united us. When good friends who share a common vision about America and a common passion for education as a vehicle for upward mobility cannot arrive at a programmatic consensus we are, indeed, in trouble.

The challenge and the problem arose with the shift in emphasis from the role of educational institutions in the production of a leadership elite, the talented tenth—that was a kind of preferential treatment for selective individuals—to an emphasis on the role that systems of public education must play in the liberation of black people as a group.

By the '60s, we were combating institutional racism, dismantling systems of legally separate schools and addressing patterns of inequity. How to eliminate vestiges of slavery and segregation in education, without destroying black institutions that had played a key role in leadership in community development during the era of segregation—this, then, became the issue that divided.

With cross-town busing, mandatory reassignment of teachers and the closing of schools, many blacks were seeing themselves, and their institutions, as bearers of an unfair burden of systemic change. And good friends were on opposite sides. We were failing to forge a consensus on strategies.

In the Atlanta school suit, for example, I found myself disagreeing with my

very good friends, Andrew Young and Vivian Henderson. Vernon Jordan will also recall the off-the-record consultation at Airlie house, organized to achieve consensus on educational issues, that disintegrated into a wild, raucous, shouting session.

Many here are too young to remember the excitement when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed with Title VI, a version of the old amendment that Adam Clayton Powell II had fought unsuccessfully to get enacted into law. Requiring all recipients of federal funds to operate without discrimination, Title VI gave federal agencies a powerful weapon for abolishing systemic patterns of discrimination nationwide.

Adams v. Richardson, filed in 1970 by the Legal Defense Fund, charged the then HEW, and later the Department of Education, with failure to carry out this mandate with respect to educational institutions. Using the withdrawal of federal funds as a weapon and a threat, the educational agencies took steps pursuant to a series of court orders in *Adams*, to end dual systems of higher education, where segregation had been legally required. How could statewide integration occur without destroying traditionally black public colleges?

This, again, was the dividing issue. It became a major challenge for me. Disagreements on this critical issue were threatening the entire civil rights compliance program. *Adams* is an example of what can happen when blacks are determined to forge a programmatic consensus that combines apparently irreconcilable objectives. Months of consultation produced a basic theoretical position. It was that statewide integration of a system of public higher education and the enhancement of its traditionally black public institutions are mutually supportive objectives to advance the goal of enlarging opportunities for blacks throughout the state system. It did not require that all institutions must mirror each other in their racial composition and academic programs. This position, which was undergirded with legal analyses by LDF lawyers, was accepted by federal agencies in both Republican and Democratic administrations and provided the framework for guidelines that reach even those states not initially covered by the suit. All 19 states with the history of legally-enforced segregation were eventually reached in one way or the other by these guidelines.

Now, why is *Adams* important? First, the position was shaped by representatives of people who would be affected by the outcome of the litigation. Black coalitions organized in the *Adams* states, following a model started by Pete Rawlings in Maryland, were actively involved in monitoring the implementation of the

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guidelines nationally and in their home states. In some states, they became THE major advocacy group on all issues in higher education affecting blacks, dealing very effectively, especially on the funding of black colleges, with state legislatures, governors and regents.

Secondly, the process worked. It was not easy—it was often very painful—but it worked. Black folks from apparently irreconcilable positions came together, grew in trust and created a programmatic consensus. It became a platform, a center that held. Progress was made in statewide desegregation, but during the life of the suit, black institutions were enhanced, and no black public college was closed. Now this is an example of a move from rhetoric and arguments over differences, to reconciliation and action.

I am convinced that we will have more issues in the 1990s that could potentially tear the black community apart. We need to build on the *Adams* experience and learn from it. It is important to discuss *Adams* tonight, because of the key role played by the Southern Education Foundation. SEF sponsored the explorations that resulted in the development of the position, and provided funds and technical assistance to the black coalitions.

The Foundation's Research Task Force, under James Blackwell, documented developments over a decade in the *Adams* states. SEF convened conferences on higher education that provided opportunity for all of the actors, including the skeptics who never supported *Adams*, to follow developments, sometimes to challenge them and always to listen to each other. This was a remarkable era.

Now, a new agenda for educational equity may well be the old agenda—simple justice—but in a new context. Whoever wins the Presidential election in the year 2000 should be advised to begin HER inaugural address, in January 2001, with a salutation: "Fellow citizens, fellow members of minorities." For by the 21st century, we will have become a nation of minorities, a nation in which no one ethnic group will have a majority of the population. What is important is the breath-taking speed at which the racial mix of the population changed during the 1980s and will continue to change during this decade, with new immigration a major contributing factor.

We are not only more diverse, there is diversity within diversity. African Americans are not just descendants of former slaves, but West Africans, Ethiopians, Haitians and other children of the worldwide African Diaspora. Asians are not just from Japanese or Chinese-American families of long residence here, but from East India and Southeast Asia. Latinos are not just Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans, but Hispanic-Americans from Cuba and a host of South American countries.

"No one minority group can legitimately fashion an agenda for everyone else."

No one minority group can legitimately fashion an agenda for everyone else. No region will be bypassed. In the 1980s, the Asian population in Georgia increased 209 percent. Hispanics increased more than 100 percent in Virginia. The absolute numbers may still be small, but the trend is inevitable. Blacks are returning to the South, reversing a 50-year exodus. Fifty-six percent of African Americans are now in the South, and will be in a greater position to use their political power to achieve educational gains. But their educational agenda will

have to be negotiated with an increasingly diverse mix of people.

Equity issues will no longer be just black/white. Look at the Miami boycott, that is essentially blacks and Haitians against a power structure dominated by Cuban-Americans. New demographic developments are most visible in the classroom. By 1995, non-Hispanic whites will be in a minority in Texas and Mississippi schools, and most of the Southeast states will have public school enrollments, 29 to 49 percent of which will be from racial or ethnic minority groups.

Therefore, educational institutions, K-12 and through the graduate and professional schools, will be the stage on which the drama of diversity will be enacted; and the war over multiculturalism will be waged.

The struggle to achieve genuine multiculturalism in education, already subject to a severe backlash, is centered on issues and disagreements involving cur-

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riculum, how certain subjects should be taught, using which materials and in which languages, and the appropriate canon of literature.

There will be increasing fights over governance and the control of policy-making agencies, and many of these will be pitched battles, engaging racial or ethnic minorities against each other.

The South has been the battleground for many wars over education, and has emerged providing some leadership for the nation, in desegregation, for example, and more recently in school reform. Will the South be a leader in multicultural education as we move into the 21st century that looks at educational equity not just as a black/white issue?

Here is an opportunity for SEF to be in the vanguard. The old agenda was premised on the conviction that education must play a role in enhancing the status of the disadvantaged. Children of low-income black families benefited from civil rights strategies and the procedures instituted to promote racial justice in educational systems.

We must set the record straight, and not allow forces on the right to rewrite history, and claim that mandatory school desegregation, busing, goals and timetables were a total failure or only benefited middle class blacks.

At the same time, we know that these procedures did not reach most poor black children in inner city ghettos, and probably never will, as housing segregation and resegregation continue.

A new agenda must, therefore, be premised on the conviction that education can be a vehicle—the "A train"—on which the poorest of the poor can be transported out of the underclass. We must design new strategies and programs that hold this promise and receive our top priority.

Fifty percent of black children are poor. Knowing through experience that

every strategy will not benefit everyone equally, we must be prepared to single out certain subgroups, and design programs to meet their unique situation. And here, I know I am in trouble, because I am advocating special programs for young, black, inner city males. As an African American woman, I am convinced that the survival of young black males, increasing their life chances, enhancing their educational opportunities and options, offering them the realistic possibility of participating in the economic mainstream, and becoming productive members of society—all of these are key to the future of black women, the stability of our families and the strengthening of our communities.

I find myself back in the early days of *Adams*, when we were attacked from all sides, because we felt compelled to take risks and undertake something which was unprecedented. Here we are again, confronted by two irreconcilable objectives. On the one hand, we must assure quality education, for all children, without creating new forms of segregation. On the other, we must design programs to meet the special needs of urban black males.

It is time to move beyond rhetoric. It is time for educators, who are struggling to design effective strategies, to be joined by lawyers, who can help put these approaches into programs that will meet constitutional requirements.

I return, in conclusion, to what has troubled me over the years. The failure of blacks with shared visions to agree on strategies, to make their visions come alive. I now have a sense of unease, and I hope I am wrong, that a growing number of Americans do not share the same vision about what America should be in the 21st century. Our vision is clouded by many uncertainties, about how to achieve common ground in the new population mix. Achieving a shared vision will become more difficult as America becomes more culturally diverse. Achieving a shared vision will become more difficult as America becomes more economically stratified. In the absence of a shared vision about America, our widening differences about the role of public schools in shaping that America will become more serious.

For most of our differences quickly become issues of money. What should be the source of public education funds? How should they be allocated? By whom, and to whom?

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Since 1967, the number of middle and upper income blacks has increased four-fold while efforts to decrease black poverty have stagnated. Middle class blacks are generous and compassionate. Many are aware that they owe their middle class status to the civil rights struggles, and they want to give something back. But middle class blacks are no different from other middle class Americans.

***"We must create more opportunities for
discussion about vision and values."***

Educational equity is not their top priority; especially if it requires more taxes, especially if it requires financing mechanisms that favor poor districts, especially if it means less financial aid for middle class students.

So we must not begin with the assumption that we have a shared vision about America, by Americans in general, and by persons of color, in particular. Or that we agree on the role that public schools should play in addressing the needs of a culturally diverse, and economically stratified nation. We must create, therefore, more opportunities for discussion about vision and values.

In very moving passages in his *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby*, Stephen Carter urges black intellectuals to overcome divisions in the black community and achieve what he calls reconciled solidarity. He does not go far enough, however, arguing vehemently against a search for solidarity on strategies and programs. To me, reconciled solidarity in shared love for our people, without solidarity in action for our people, will not suffice. But his plea is, indeed, a beginning.

Next year, the Southern Education Foundation will celebrate the 125th anniversary of the creation of its predecessor fund by George Peabody. As George Peabody appointed the first trustees he told them, "I came to the conclusion that there were men who were just as anxious to work with integrity for the suffering and the struggling poor, as I had been to gather fortune."

Present at the first meeting of the trustees, in February 1867, reported as a very emotional affair, and barely two years after Appomattox, were former Northern and Southern governors, and General Ulysses S. Grant. Now, SEF may never again have such a board. General Schwartzkopf has not been persuaded to become a trustee of the Southern Education Foundation. And God forbid that trustees will ever meet again in the aftermath of a devastating domestic civil war.

But Peabody's commitment, for work with integrity for the suffering and struggling poor through supporting advances in education in the South, has been the sustaining mission of the Southern Education Foundation throughout the years. SEF has undergone many changes. One very pleasant change is that it is no longer just governed by white men. And, it has been able, increasingly, to find more creative ways to implement the original mission.

Decades ago, it was a major force for an awakening of the movement for free public schools in the South. Today, it is a major force in making systems of public education centers for excellence and equity.

I am proud to be honored and to stand in this tradition. Thank you.

SOUTHERN EDUCATION FOUNDATION
135 Auburn Avenue, Second Floor
Atlanta, Georgia 30303
(404) 523-0001